"MAIR NOR A ROUCH WIND BLAWIN..."

Alan Lawson

The 1987 Result

Although the 1987 election result in Scotland did not immediately cause a revolution of any kind, there are certainly grounds for regarding it as a political milestone in the process – a process which has been gaining speed over the past 25-30 years – whereby Scotland re-establishes a separate identity, politically and in other fields, and effectively de-colonises itself from the British ascendancy. On June 11th 1987, "the winds of change" (H MacMillan) turned into "a rouch wind blawin" (H Henderson).

The election results are analysed in detail elsewhere in this journal, but some figures have to be cited at the onset here by way of introduction. Labour's 50 MPs was the highest number for any party (ie, excluding Coalitions) since the Liberals' 58 in 1910. The Tories' 10 seats represented their worst result since 1910, and is the smallest number of MPs which a government party has ever had in Scotland. (The only remotely similar situation was their 13 seats in the Conservative Government of 1922-23.) And it is in this respect that the National Question has moved centre-stage, since the Tories now have the task of running the political system in Scotland with a team which is so short on numbers (not to mention talent). And it is certainly the Tories weakness and the challenging of their 'mandate to govern Scotland' that is creating the potential for change, rather than the increased strength of Labour (important though that is).

The fact that the Tories now have such a problem stems from the concessions which have been made to national sentiment and political pressure over the past hundred years, from the appointment of the first Scottish Secretary in 1885, through the setting up of the Scottish Office in the 1930s (and the subsequent expansion of its functions), to the advent of the Scottish Select Committee at the start of this decade (as part of the setting up of the many UK Select Committees), and the growing prominence (although not power) of the Scottish Grand Committee. It is these past developments which now make the Tories' position so embarrassing, and which make Scotland so different from those areas in the North of England where the Tories did poorly against Labour.

Yet historically, the Tories regularly did much worse in Scotland than in England from 1900 until the Second World War. It was only in the period

1945-55 that they were able to do as well (or even a little better) here than in the south. Ever since 1959 they have polled worse in Scotland than their counterparts in England, and the Labour Party have been the majority party in Scotland now for almost 30 years. In the 13 post-war elections, the Scottish Labour lead (in seats) over the Tories has been: 10, 6, 0, –2, 7, 19, 26, 21, 19, 25, 22, 20, 40. That sequence shows how strong the trend has been and how marked the latest result is.

The significance of the 1987 result is strengthened by the degree of tactical voting which apparently took place. In the marginal seats held by the Tories, votes seemed to swing to the immediate challenger, regardless of party, in order to displace the incumbent MP. Hence, Labour were able to win seats in middle-class areas, whilst the Liberals – despite suffering quite a downturn in their support – were able to win seats like North-East Fife and Argyll. In the seats which the SNP gained, there was hardly any increase in the Labour vote... in marked contrast to elsewhere. (A further point of interest was the marked rise in turnout in most seats, indicating perhaps a renewed sense of purpose on the part of the electorate: only 14 of the 72 seats showed a lower turnout that in 1983 – of which 10 were the Tory wins and the other 4 Alliance wins.) During the campaign there was some encouragement given to the electorate to vote tactically against the Tories. An organisation called TV'87 (Tactical Voting 87) tried to attract prominent supporters and gain publicity, whilst the *Glasgow Herald* called on its readers to "make a statement about the way that Scotland is governed".

The extent to which people increasingly voted anti-Tory (a) because they wanted some form of Scottish self-government, as against (b) because they didn't like Tory policies, is not easy to ascertain, but the two may be becoming so closely fused (as argued later) that it may represent less and less of a distinction as time goes on. If there is truth in (a), then the electorate have shown a considerable degree of sophistication over the past 15 years in their ways of supporting self-government... by voting SNP in the early/mid-70s, then by voting 'yes' in the 1979 referendum, and now by voting tactically anti-Tory.

Are The Trends Irreversible?

The ways in which the parties in Scotland will approach the somewhat bizarre situation they now face has (at time of writing) only partly been revealed, but their approaches will be conditioned by the extent to which the political trends – at Scottish and UK level – appear to be inevitable and irreversible. The recent voting figures don't look good for the Tories in this respect: in 1979, they reassured themselves when they won back the seats lost to the SNP in '74; but in 1987, in the face of Rifkind forecasts of re-taking the seats narrowly lost to the Alliance in '83, those Alliance MPs were all returned with greatly increased majorities (and despite the

Alliance's Scottish vote falling from 25% to 19%). So it seems to be getting harder and harder for the Tories to take back lost ground.

A further factor which makes the Tory position more difficult to reverse is that they are now 'below the PR line' – ie, they get far fewer seats than their vote would allow them under a PR voting system. (They can hardly complain, of course, since party policy is opposed to PR.) But whilst they have been winning *slightly* fewer seats than their deserts over the past 30 years, the latest result gave them only 10 when their share of the vote (24%) should have entitled them to 17. In turn, this 'disadvantage' leaves them so short of talent to run the Scottish political system that the performance of those selected for office is quite likely to further discredit the party and damage its future electoral chances. (On the plus side, the behaviour of Lord James Douglas-Hamilton keeps the political satirists of the land well stocked with stories.)

But in seeking to discover whether current trends are likely to continue, it is necessary to look beyond the immediate election figures, for, given the socio-economic make-up of the Scottish population and given statistics like average income per head, our voting patterns should be more in line with the English Midlands. This large, and growing, discrepancy requires a wider treatment, involving sociological and cultural factors.

Some of the structural reasons for the Tories' decline in Scotland over the past 30 years were outlined in an article by Stephen Maxwell in *Radical Scotland* No.15 (June/July 1985). He suggested that Scottish Toryism no longer seemed to make any contribution at intellectual level (apart from the freelance ideologues of the Smith and Hume Institutes in London) as compared with the 19th and early 20th centuries. Further, the great industrial Tory families of the inter-war period had disappeared and not been replaced, due to the many take-overs from the south and the subsequent branch-economy nature of industry in Scotland. In terms of image, the appointment of landed gentry and such-like Public school figures as Secretaries of State (eg, Noble, Campbell, Younger) gave the party a "grouse-moor" feel to it. In more direct voting terms, the consistently higher Scottish rate of unemployment (since the '60s) has tended to turn people away from the Conservatives, whilst even the old working-class Orange vote which the Tories used to get has apparently largely deserted them.

The only one of these factors which seems capable of being reversed is the "grouse-moor" image, but recruitment by the Party is so low that any 'new image' is likely to be of the young radical right – something liable to cause even greater disenchantment amongst the Scottish electorate. Indeed, it has been the 1970s rise of the New Right in the south which has perhaps caused the greatest reaction by the Scottish electorate against the Tory Party. The new zeal for economic liberalism has been perceived as bad

news for Scotland, with an increase in damaging take-overs in the private sector and a decline in support (ideological and financial) for Regional Aid in the public sector. Currently, the driving ahead of the Chunnel project may symbolise for many Scots the new centralist and 'south-east corner' mentality of the Tory Government.

And there are other aspects of the New Right's thinking which strike faulty chords in Scotland. As sociologist Isobel Lindsay states in *Radical Scotland* No.29 (Oct/Nov 1987), "the current harsh social Darwinism is not an ideology which fits well with the experiences of 20th century Scots. We have been too conscious of the fact that many of the problems and ills that have beset us and our parents were not of our own making. Even in the last ten years, the best things to have happened in Scotland – environmental, cultural, recreational – have been primarily primed by public money; the worst things that have happened – high unemployment and cuts in services – have been caused by lack of public funding or by the ruthlessness of private institutions."

Further problems have arisen for the Tories on the policy side. The closure of Gartcosh (which caused a revolt within their own ranks) was seen by many as symbolic of a lack of concern for and interest in industry generally and Scottish heavy industry in particular. The ham-fisted handling of the cold climate allowance issue during the winter of '86/87 was the kind of thing that remains in people's minds for a long time, adding 'geographism' to the list of 'isms' associated with the Tory party. The use of Scotland as a testing-ground for legislative experimentation (extended police powers, poll tax) represents a quite remarkable insensitivity to Scottish feelings. Again, there is no sign that any of this will change.

And then we come to the question of self-government, which is increasingly damaging for the Tories. It's not just that the Tory party is setting its face ever more firmly against self-government at a time when political and economic developments have tended to increase the demand and the enthusiasm for it; it's the way that the Tories have gone about it. When Lord Douglas-Home was trotted out to tell everyone in 1979 to "vote NO and we'll provide a better form of devolution", it was only a short-term strategy; the ploy is now seen so clearly to have been downright dishonest that the Tories are now perceived as the Party which is 'economical with the truth' even on the matters of greatest importance. It is unlikely that people will forget that manoeuvre.

On the positive side, the last 20 years – and the post-79 period in particular – have seen many aspects of a national revival, especially on the cultural side. Given the increasingly mono-cultural nature of English society, all such developments represent a potential strengthening of the desire for self-government and the determination to pursue it. Advances have taken place in publishing in particular, with an apparently ever-

increasing stream of books on all things Scottish, especially history. Meanwhile, attempts to introduce more Scottish material into the schools' curriculum seem to be making headway. The opening of the Burrell and the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art have boosted national prestige, as have the host of small specialist and local museums. The rise and rise of Scottish pop groups now complements the high standard of the many successful professional folk-groups. On the sports field national teams and individuals usually acquit themselves with dignity, if not always with success, but it is the former which is the more valid litmus-test of a reviving self-confidence. On the spectating side, the contrasting behaviour of Scottish and English travelling football supporters perhaps has as much to tell us about the relative healths of the two societies as any other measure. This, and the fact that Scottish football clubs now buy *English* players, should not be underestimated as an influence on the state of the national self-confidence.

On the international front, a further division between Scotland and Thatcher's England was seen at the time of the Commonwealth Games in 1986, when a number of persons prominent in Scottish society were prepared to align themselves with a call for sanctions against South Africa, thereby creating an alternative Scottish viewpoint on an international issue of the day. At a lower level, our efforts to assist the third world are increasingly being made on a direct basis (eg, through organisations like SCIAF and Scottish Aid for Nicaragua) rather than just through southern 'national' headquarters.

The intensity of these increasing differences between the two societies has of course been heightened by the apparent permanence of the Tory government and of Mrs Thatcher as Prime Minister. One of the consequences of this has been the way in which Mrs Thatcher has come to represent English nationalism. As Isobel Lindsay puts it: "The enthusiasm which many working-class as well as middle-class English feel for Margaret Thatcher is related to their perception of their national identity; she represents an assertive, maudlinly sentimental English nationalism – fulfilling a yearning for renewed imperial glory. The role of the British bomb has had much more to do with the desire for prestige and status than to do with defence needs. This dominant strand of English nationalism strikes few chords in Scottish hearts. Scottish national sentiment has developed in different directions. We are David rather than Goliath; we are the underdogs, with considerable sympathy for other underdogs; we are less xenophobic (if for no other reason than that so many of our friends and relatives live abroad); we have no delusions of potential 'great power' status. Therefore, Thatcher's strand of English nationalism which has been accepted so warmly in the South, has produced attitudes ranging from the ambivalent to the antagonistic here."

These powerful underlying trends within Britain are very important

for any attempt to determine where we are now and what is likely to happen in the next few years. They are more important than a simple study of the policies of the different parties or the precise results of particular elections. And the significance of them is that they all seem to point in the direction of a further decline in support for the Tory party in Scotland (or, at the very least, no real recovery.) If the Tories continue to be the government of the United Kingdom – which seems pretty likely for the foreseeable future – then their weakness in Scotland does create a political instability, if not a crisis.

The Parties' Initial Responses

The possibility of any change in the attitude of the Tory party seems small. At UK level they can apparently do no wrong, and the policies of the radical right continue to be fed into the party machine and continue to be acted upon. In Scotland, although there has been a fair amount of internal discontent – much of it showing an understanding of the points which have been made above – and although the question of devolution was raised in several quarters post-election, the *official* line is against any policy change, and the line against self-government in particular has hardened, with Lord Goold leading the way, Allan Stewart finding an apparent new lease of life in this crusade, and with various ex-MPs almost having to join the NUJ, so frequent are their appearances in the columns of the Scottish quality press 'explaining' the election result and pointing the way ahead. (Michael Ancram actually appeared with major articles in both the *Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman* on the same day on one occasion!) The Party at grass roots level seems to have too little clout to cause any serious challenge at this stage, and given that they were unable to find 72 Scottish candidates to fight the election in June (having to import various 'radical righters' and 'Sloane Rangers' from London for some of the Glasgow constituencies, who became known as 'The White Knights'), their relative weakness within the Party machine is fairly understandable. Meantime, further moves by the establishment included a flying visit to Glasgow by the Adam Smith Institute's representatives, ringing calls for "more Thatcherism" from the White Knights, and a conference publication from Eastwood constituency. It is doubtful, however, whether these manoeuvres did more than highlight the Tories' Scottish weakness.

The position of Malcolm Rifkind is particularly interesting, since it is clear that (a) he remains committed in principle to some form of self-government for Scotland, and (b) he is unlikely to believe that more Thatcherism will reverse his Party's decline in Scotland. Indeed, in an interview with the *Press and Journal* (September), he described the introduction of further right-wing policies in Scotland as "a high-risk strategy", thereby apparently distancing himself from any future falling masonry (and/or falling support). His close acquaintance Brian Meek, Tory leader on Lothian Regional Council, stated in an interview (September)

that he believed that "devolution was inevitable and that our Party should be the one to do it". Meek also viewed the hard line with some scepticism, and reckoned that the May 1988 District Elections would be a crucial test for the Party's recovery or otherwise, and that if it were otherwise then the devolutionists might become more prominent again.

For the Labour Party in Scotland, the result induced a kind of political schizophrenia, with their best-ever Scottish result coinciding with a further desperate defeat in the south. The immediate response of the frustrated 'Gang of 50' in the House of Commons is described elsewhere in this volume, and there is no doubt that the result caused a difference of view within the Party as to what should or could be done about challenging the Tories' mandate in Scotland. The Party establishment – epitomised by Donald Dewar – wanted to do nothing out of the ordinary, whilst a number of the MPs and an indeterminate section of the Party membership were looking for serious political action. Three major intellectual challenges faced the Party: first, confronting the very real possibility that Labour would not win the *next* General Election; any who took this view would clearly distance themselves from Donald Dewar's "long haul" approach (ie, a 5-year approach.) Second, was the possibility that if a Scottish Assembly were to be won from an unenthusiastic Tory Government, then there might be a price to be paid in terms of (a) a reduction in the number of Scottish MPs at Westminster, and (b) the possible withdrawal of Scottish MPs during debates on 'devolved business' for England & Wales; such concessions would clearly make the job of the UK Labour Party in winning and exercising power that bit more difficult. And thirdly, there was the prospect that any serious action on the National Question might well have to involve co- operation with other pro-Assembly forces, including political parties. (Initial forays into cross-party activity by Labour in the shape of a Festival For Scottish Democracy (in September) were tentative, with the SNP and the Alliance deciding not to participate due to being only half-heartedly or compromisingly invited.) All three of these points would represent *major* departures from traditional Labour thinking. At the same time, Labour had by now won just about everything there was to win in Scotland apart from the Scottish Cup; from such a position it was clearly difficult to go up, and fairly easy to go down.

The prominence of the National Question in all such deliberations within the People's Party was further heightened by the problems of opposing the unpopular poll tax, due to be introduced in Scotland first (starting in April 1989, with the Registration process beginning in April 1988). For some Party members, the STOPIT campaign should be founded on the 'No Tory Mandate in Scotland' issue, whilst for others the campaign was attractive as an alternative to or even a diversion from the constitutional issue.

The only fixed item on the agenda (as far as the National Question was

concerned) was the presentation of an Assembly Bill to Parliament on 30th November. There were several problems connected with that move (such as tactics, publicity, and campaigning), but since the Bill was going to be defeated by the massed ranks of the Tory faithful, the *real* question was what – if anything – was going to be planned as a response to that Tory rejection. There would be two distinct options at that stage: (1) to attempt (with other forces) to set up some kind of forum of MPs, Councillors, and other elected and non-elected representatives of Scottish life, thereby challenging the British right to rule in Scotland, and discussing important Scottish matters and the form of any future Scottish government, or (2) minor forms of protest could be undertaken which would represent no such challenge, and which would therefore be a recognition that nothing could be done to advance the Assembly cause this side of the next election (and a Labour victory in that election). It is certainly possible that a pressure group of some kind will appear in the Labour Party to further the cause of option 1, an option which is being pursued by the cross-Party Campaign for a Scottish Assembly, using a Steering Committee as a springboard. Whatever the outcome, it is the most traumatic situation the Party in Scotland has ever found itself in, and therefore any simple resolution of the problems (and the divisions) is unlikely. As Tom Nairn (the author of *The Break-up of Britain*) put it in a short analysis in the July issue of *Marxism Today*: "Caledonian Labourism has always been ultra-conscientious in its obeisance to all the icons of Windsordom. The irony is that Scotland's quest for a more modern and distinct identity has ended in the clammy embrace of the party historically most hypnotised by Britishness. The question is whether the Scottish Labour Party can eventually change its own nature and become both national enough and, more importantly, democratic enough to assume the responsibility which history seems to have thrust upon them."

The SNP, did not enjoy the best of results in the election (2 losses, 3 gains), and the loss of chairman Gordon Wilson's seat was a great disappointment to the Party. (His resolve to stay on as chairman due to the persuasions of Mrs Winnie Ewing looked a dubious life-support system for him in a Party which has been cultivating a modern and left-of-centre image for several years now.) However, the Party – whilst less successful than it would like – has been doing nothing wrong for almost 5 years, an achievement not to be underestimated in a Party where commitment is so strong and disappointments have been so many. Given its improved presentation in the media and given the growing trends towards national self-confidence, the Party must be dismayed that considerably increased support has not been forthcoming. Yet they are well positioned: with the Tories in disarray, Labour seeming to be at a peak and faced with a major political conundrum, and with the Alliance falling away due to merger wrangles, it seems that the SNP must go up soon. Hopes for the District Elections in May 1988 are high, and if Labour's opposition to the 'Tory mandate' falls flat, then major gains for the SNP seem likely. Local by-

election results already point in that direction.

The Alliance also came out of the election with mixed feelings: a good showing in Scotland with 1 loss and 2 gains, giving 9 seats, but failing to 'break the mould' in the UK. It seems unlikely that the Alliance parties will (separately or together) set the heather on fire in Scotland over the next few years. The merger negotiations will likely take up an inordinate amount of activists' time and energy; the Liberals – a small party on the ground – sends too much of its available talent to Westminster (starting with the leader); the Young Libs seem to be an ex-force; and the SDP is a very small party in Scotland. The prospects for the Alliance in Scotland would seem to rest almost entirely on their TV image and the success (or otherwise) of the merger process.

It is perhaps an indication of the significance of the National Question now in Scottish politics that all four/five of the parties seem to be in a weak position in one way or another, and that seems to suggest an unreality about the situation which seems unlikely to continue indefinitely.

Summary

The election of '87 created what might be called 'an unstable equilibrium', and there are basically three possible outcomes. First, that situation could be challenged by the opposition forces in Scotland, although that would not be easy and it would certainly involve tactics not formerly seen. Secondly, the Tories could alter policy on the National Question and introduce a scheme which was of considerable benefit to the Tory Party at UK level (ie, an Assembly scheme with reduced representation for Scotland – and hence Labour – at Westminster); however, this scenario looks pretty unlikely as long as (a) Mrs Thatcher remains Tory leader (since she has always hated the whole idea of devolution for Scotland), and/or (b) the Tories seem likely to win the next election fairly comfortably anyway. The third possibility is that very little happens, with the Tory 10-man team struggling along and 'brass-necking' their weak position and general unpopularity.

However, if the question remains unresolved by the next General Election, then for the many reasons outlined earlier in this article, it is highly likely that the Tories will lose a further block of Scottish seats (4 of their seats have majorities of 2,000 or less) leaving them in a *rely* impossible position next time. Whichever of these scenarios comes to pass, the view that "Devolution is inevitable" (Brian Meek) does now seem to be the case, and it is also likely that any shift of political power to Scotland would now go far beyond the devolutionary ideas of the '70s and would be closer to some kind of 'quasi-federalism'.

And although the 1987 election may not of itself have brought a major

shake-up of the constitutional arrangements within the United Kingdom, it will probably be seen in retrospect as a very significant milestone on that road, a point from which there is unlikely to be any turning back.

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